

Hitting the Right Note.

Laura Freid, MBA '89.

BY MATTHEW BELLICO

The Silk Road is a bit of a mystery to most Americans. A vague textbook reference from their middle school social studies class. Something filed away and long forgotten.

Well, **Laura Freid** (MBA '89) and Yo-Yo Ma are here to refresh your memory.

Let's get you up to speed.

For nearly 1,600 years—up until around Columbus—the Silk Road served as a crucial trade route and cultural link across Eurasia, that great landmass between Venice and Japan. Mathematics, gunpowder, and the printing press all migrated to Europe along this early connector, which created a powerful give and take among societies.

What you probably don't know is that the legacy of those East-West interactions includes the lead singer of a Chinese hard rock band—one who also plays an ancient bamboo mouth organ, called the *sheng*.

"Wu Tong is a major star in China, but he's very approachable," says Freid, referring to a man who can both rock out in American-style leather pants and play soulful Eastern melodies.

It's nothing out of the ordinary for Freid. Eclectic and downright enigmatic musicians regularly fill the offices of the Silk Road Project in

downtown Providence, R.I. Freid is executive director and CEO of this educational initiative, which promotes the traditional music and culture of the countries that sit along the historic overland route.

Only in town for the day, Wu Tong is taking a break from a Silk Road Project and Carnegie Hall Composition Workshop in New York City (where he plays the *sheng*) to hear cellist Yo-Yo Ma and other Silk Road Ensemble members with the Rhode Island Philharmonic.

Ma founded the Silk Road Project in 1998, and its centerpiece ensemble of approximately 60 international musicians performs worldwide in a variety of smaller lineups.

"Yo-Yo Ma uses the Silk Road as a metaphor for cultural exchange. Traders on the Silk Road couldn't necessarily all speak the same language, but they could still trade silk for glass, spices, and other

commodities. It was the Internet of Antiquity," says Freid.

Ma first became enamored with the idea when he taught music master classes to students in Jordan and later in Israel. It led to the creation of the Middle



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Eastern Youth Orchestra, where both Israelis and Palestinians played together.

Freid says that by “investigating the past and bringing people together in the present through music, they’ll focus more on the things they share in common rather than their differences.”

She joined the Silk Road Project in 2004 after a successful career as an editor and publisher at BU and then at *Harvard Magazine*, before working as an executive vice president at Brown University.

“I think of myself as a storyteller,” says Freid, who still has much of the former reporter and editor in her. “I’ve always been interested in narrative and how you get to the core of individual identity.”

Freid has expanded the Silk Road Ensemble’s depth and breath, including its affiliations with Harvard University and the Rhode Island School of Design. She’s also enhanced its popular concert series.

A poster from one of those globetrotting concerts sits prominently in her office amid the unpronounceable musical instruments and other mementos of her travels. It’s from the city of Nara in southern Japan.

A large Buddha dominates the design and sparks the curiosity. It is reputedly the world’s largest made out of bronze.

“Oh, we played at the request of the monks at the Todai-ji Temple last October,” she says, catching me looking and not missing a beat.

My interest peaked, I question her further. Who knew you could perform in front of the Buddha?

“Only a handful of musicians receive an invitation to perform there,” she says. “In the early evening, seats were set up so that people from Nara could attend and the temple was packed with listeners, but there was no clapping allowed. When it was over the monks greeted us with visible enthusiasm and we were told that the Buddha was very happy with the performance.”

Audiences at the Hollywood Bowl, Carnegie Hall, and all the smaller whistle stops the Silk Road Ensemble has visited share their enthusiasm. It’s a rarity when shows aren’t sold out.

The ensemble’s musicians hail from countries like Mongolia, India, Uzbekistan, and Korea. They come together to play their original work, performed on traditional instruments like Wu Tong’s *sheng*, but also on Japanese bamboo stalk flutes called *shakuhachi*, Indian drums named *tabla*, and Mongolian “horse fiddles” or *morin khuur*.

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It’s haunting music— some type of melancholy soundtrack that one might dream up while crossing the Mongolian steppe at night.

Ma describes the relationship between his fellow musicians in the Silk Road album “Beyond the Horizon” like this: “Many of us did not play the same scales or speak the same language. Some read music, while others did not. Rather than drawing us apart, these differences had the opposite effect of deepening our curiosity to learn more about each other.”

“That’s part of its inspiration,” says Freid. “We have musicians from Armenia and Azerbaijan playing together even though today you can’t even cross the border between those countries. And we often play with Iranians, who have to travel to Dubai to get a visa, since our two countries have no formal diplomatic ties.”

Freid aims to engender the same multiculturalism in the ensemble’s listeners.

In the past, it’s meant successful collaboration with art museums, such

as the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., which houses an extensive array of Asian art.

These “museum residencies,” as Freid calls them, allow the Silk Road Ensemble to perform at an institution for weeks at a time—often playing music written for a museum’s particular collection.

“For the Peabody Essex, ensemble members created a piece inspired by an ancient scroll that depicted a Chinese emperor traveling south on a river boat. They composed the music to describe what an emperor would hear as he journeyed down the river. The scroll was 30 feet long so we actually filmed the scroll as it unrolled and showed it during our performances,” says Freid.

However, Freid and Silk Road will undertake a much more ambitious agenda this summer in Chicago with a first citywide residency.

The Silk Road Ensemble will launch the event with a free concert in Chicago’s Millennium Park in June and will continue with concerts at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and a museum residency at the Art Institute of Chicago.

There, patrons will get a closer look at the art of the Silk Road—sculptures, scrolls, and drawings—that these often undervalued societies produced.

Freid hopes to continue the year-long celebration with other Silk Road themed events, such as workshops where children decorate drums, and food tastings of traditional cuisine.

Rather than seeing the public turn its back on such multinational endeavors, especially those that prominently celebrate Middle Eastern culture, Freid says the post-9/11 world has welcomed their efforts.

“9/11 has actually amplified the need for projects like this,” she says.

“I think more people realize that the more you find out about someone else’s culture, the more you can understand how much you might share in common and the more you can relate to each other.” ■